

Democracy: reply to questions from Oxford Democracy Cafe

PART I: Democracy questions for all Council candidates

1. What do you think have been the most effective actions your council has taken to deliver democracy locally during the Coronavirus pandemic? E.g. housing the homeless, setting up support hubs, waiving local property taxes, providing more cycleways, etc.

Greens recognise that the pandemic has made it difficult for the City Council to engage with the wider community and that the support hubs and other networks have certainly helped the most vulnerable.

Initiatives to house homeless people during the pandemic have come via government funding, but are very short term, and Greens know that the Council needs to do far more to help prevent people from ending up back on the streets. Green Councillors have a long track record of challenging the City Council about inadequate support for homeless people. If more had been done by the City to provide support and housing over many years, Greens believe there would have been far fewer homeless people to support during the pandemic. The issue of democracy in relation to homelessness is the lack of access to the democratic process, and Greens believe the City Council should do more at all times (not just during a pandemic) to encourage and support homeless people to register to vote and engage in local democracy. The only time homeless people have had a real voice is when Green Councillors secured a place on a Council committee for a homeless person who was well networked with the homeless community in Oxford, but when that person left Oxford no attempt was made to find someone to replace him.

The Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN) are the result of government funding given to Oxfordshire County Council during the first lockdown in 2020, so not a direct responsibility of the City Council. Separately from this, in the area covering The Plain to Magdalen Road, Green Councillors secured funding in 2019 for a pilot LTN and have (together with local candidates) been consulting with residents. Since the March 2020 lockdown, Greens have conducted extensive consultation with residents using neighbourhood WhatsApp and email lists, leaflet drops, 8 well-attended online public meetings, and traffic surveys with residents (when Covid restrictions allowed) to ensure as many residents as possible had a stake in the final scheme. Greens believe that the best way to implement traffic schemes is by involving those most affected. There is no evidence that Councillors from other parties have conducted any consultation with residents in other LTN areas.

City Council meetings have been online since the first lockdown in March 2020. Public attendance at Council meetings pre-pandemic was low. Greens believe the City Council should have done more to take advantage of the high online engagement during the pandemic to engage more residents in attending (i.e., watching) Council meetings. Greens also believe that post-Covid Council meetings should have a live broadcast so that more residents who are unable to get to the Town Hall can still watch

meetings, that there should be an opportunity for feedback from residents (via chat) and that residents who request to speak at a Council meeting should have the option of doing this remotely (as they have during the pandemic).

2. For each of these please describe briefly how they have contributed to local democratic participation, e.g. how/have the homeless had a say on how and where they have been housed and what they personally might do to help others?

Rough sleepers/homelessness: Local councils are working in equal partnership with charities and the Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF). To make sure that people who have a real-life experience of homelessness have a voice in local decision-making, LEAF informs the development and design of homelessness services, both existing and future, in close co-operation with local councils. This 'co-production' model makes sure that the needs of the homeless are met in a respectful, targeted and meaningful way, and provides the chance to learn from other projects working in a similar way in other parts of the country. Going forward, a new LEAF Coordinator role has just been created, with the new appointee having started in January 2021.

With a higher number of rough sleepers in Oxford than anywhere else in the County, the City Council does not have a good record of engagement with the homeless community, leaving it to the various Oxford-based homeless organisations and voluntary groups to do outreach work. Green Councillors secured a seat on a Council committee for a homeless person, and through direct work with homeless people found someone who was in touch with many other homeless people and so was able to represent their views and needs. Unfortunately, when that person left Oxford the City Council made no attempt to find another homeless person to take his place, losing that vital voice on the Council.

The *neighbour support volunteering scheme* might have contributed to more people being involved in their communities, although whether this has any longer-lasting effect remains to be seen.

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods/pedestrianised zones: The priority accorded to motorised traffic in recent years has had an impact on the way in which public spaces have been designed and has meant that public health and quality of life for residents have not been at the forefront of decision making. A transformation of this approach has started to take root: projects such as low traffic neighbourhoods and the pedestrianisation of Broad Street represent a badly needed and much welcome change, and are effective instruments for revitalising public spaces and making them both environmentally friendlier and more attractive at the same time. Preserving cycle access will at the same time encourage active travel in the respective surrounding areas and empower people to reduce their own carbon footprint. Greens have long argued for better transport planning, putting forward well-researched proposals that prioritise walking, cycling and public transport.

Fundamentally, democratic engagement relies on people having a good enough standard of living to fulfil all basic needs, and we all know that this is currently far from the case, with the wealth gap widening during the pandemic. Many people have done what they can to combat this, notably taking active roles in food banks and food parcel deliveries. Oxford City Council housed rough sleepers but this only happened because

of government funding and there is no real plan for what would happen to those homeless people post-pandemic. Historically, the City Council has closed emergency accommodation and hostels, which is very short-sighted. Green Councillors have fought for better and more joined up services for homeless people, linking housing to the social and medical care that many need.

3. How have you worked together with local community and street support groups?

Green Councillors, former councillors, and candidates have been active in their communities during the pandemic, volunteering to be street champions, delivering food parcels, setting up local WhatsApp groups, sharing helpful advice and information via local WhatsApp and other neighbourhood fora including via NextDoor and Facebook, and helping the most vulnerable.

4. To what extent has the pandemic led you to do/think about doing things differently as a locally elected representative to work/act democratically?

Grassroots street-level communication has certainly taken off, with websites such as NextDoor, community Facebook sites, etc, where people with sufficient resources to use them can help each other with information, exchange goods, etc. – these pre-date the pandemic, but have flourished through it. Community neighbourhood projects (community orchards, etc) have long existed; and the last year seems to have encouraged more people to take part in them while they have not been able to work.

In the first 6 months of lockdown, quieter streets have encouraged more people to think about making walking and cycling easier in the City, but their interest and enthusiasm needs to be encouraged by the City Council to ensure the long-term changes that will make neighbourhoods into safe, pleasant, and pollution-free places in which to spend time.

Greens have a long history of encouraging and supporting the establishment of residents' groups, something on which the City Council has a poor track record. Experiences during the pandemic with support schemes and the growing number of neighbourhood groups, has highlighted that there is a need for better investment in neighbourhoods, supporting residents to build up strong community links and set up neighbourhood associations. This is crucial for tackling loneliness and building community cohesion. Greens support less hierarchical, bottom-up decision making, to empower local groups, communities and volunteers to be creative and to speak out.

One of the biggest threats to local democracy is how local planning policy is developed and implemented. Greens believe that the City Council's emphasis on creating more jobs is misplaced. Before the pandemic over 46,000 people were commuting into Oxford every day, putting pressure on transport infrastructure and adding to pollution levels. The need for genuinely affordable (social) housing has been clear for many years and it was Green City Councillors who secured a change in housing policy that led to on-site social housing on any development of 10 or more residential properties.

Greens have been calling for many years for a more holistic approach to planning, building housing where there are good public transport links as well as cycle infrastructure, whilst ensuring that residents have access to open space (so vital for welfare and fitness). In addition, Greens have long called for the City Council to use brownfield sites for housing as a priority.

Green Councillors take an innovative approach to housing, promoting co-housing, self-build, and other community schemes. A few years ago, Greens proposed the building of eco homes above Park & Rides as an ideal opportunity to provide social housing on bus routes. Greens secured external funding for a pilot scheme, but it was rejected by City Council leaders who wanted to save the space in case a second level of parking was needed. Greens believe placing parking above housing is the wrong priority.

The changing face of high streets and more people working from home, accelerated by the pandemic, are the perfect opportunity for the City Council to rethink how the City is planned, moving away from a market-led approach to one that puts social and environmental concerns at the heart of policy-making.

Greens have been arguing for some years now that a piecemeal approach to planning across the County is not working and that there needs to be a county-wide land use plan looking at housing and employment need, what land is available, transport links, and what infrastructure (e.g., schools) would be needed. This is the best chance to get what is needed in the most sustainable location and to shift the focus away from market-led development decisions that do not, in general, provide what is actually needed.

Greens believe that planning decisions should be made by local people, not by central government officials or Ministers. The South Oxfordshire Local Plan is a worrying case in point, where a government minister intervened because the new political leadership of the Council (Greens and LibDems took control from the Tories in 2019) rejected the assumptions behind the local plan. As an indication of the direction in which Greens believe planning should be going, Councillors in South Oxfordshire have been pushing against the growth agenda and have already secured greater emphasis on climate change and sustainability in the local economic plan.

5. Following the implementation of the 2019 Oxford Citizens' Assembly into cabinet member's responsibilities, how has this helped / will this help you to work on climate emergency measures?

Green City Councillors have been proposing measures to tackle climate change since the first Green was elected in 1994 and every initiative the Council has ever been involved with has come from Greens. Greens first tabled a climate emergency motion in November 2018 but could not get support from Council leaders, so it was not debated until January 2019, when it was passed with cross-party support. Although the City leadership reluctantly accepted a citizen's assembly, they refused to support a Green budget amendment that would have funded it, leaving it in limbo. That Green budget amendment was the result of a Green-led participatory budgeting meeting

attended by approximately 40 local climate activists. In April 2019, seeing no real action from the City Council on the climate emergency, Green Councillors tabled a second climate emergency motion consisting of a series of things the Council could do very quickly in response to the climate emergency. That motion was amended down by the Council leadership using a newly proposed citizen's assembly that would meet 5 months later as an excuse to delay any action. The citizen's assembly finally met almost a year after the climate emergency motion was first tabled. Action on the outcomes was delayed because of the pandemic. Greens will continue to challenge City leaders to treat the climate emergency with more urgency.

PART II: Other questions that might be considered further by councillors and voters

'Those who shout the loudest' have disproportionate influence. Ways of avoiding this?

Systematic consultation on proposals is vital to ensure that the broad range of people and interests affected have an influence commensurate with the impacts that they (will) experience. Making this happen requires a concerted and co-ordinated effort through local representatives, local groups and the local press to get the word out and elicit responses, making people aware of key policies and decisions that are under discussion/development, and how they might be affected by them. Where those shouting loudly manage to raise certain topics, it is incumbent upon local officials, political representatives, journalists and activists to highlight the full context and range of issues at stake, to ensure that they receive balanced and sensible coverage and treatment.

From 2004 to 2011, under changes to local authorities brought in by the government, monthly area committees were set up by the City Council. Greens led a successful pilot area committee in East Oxford and, as a result, area committees were rolled out across the City. Greens ran the East Area Committee for most of the seven years it was running and it was the best attended area committee anywhere across the City. Greens led the way in participatory democracy, using the area committee as an opportunity to hear from residents about both local and Council issues, and to educate residents about the Council. It was a popular model of local democracy and contributed to community cohesion. Greens were actively opposed to the abolition of the area committees by Council leaders in 2011.

Greens place a high value on democracy and believe that Councillors are there not only to represent their community but also to act as a link between their Ward and the Council. Greens also understand that Councillors need to have a good knowledge of Oxford as a whole in order to make good decisions.

Does winning an election give a mandate to make decisions without further consultation?

Absolutely not. Situations change and new events need to be incorporated into policy- and decision-making. Winning an election means that bringing forward proposals that were promised in a manifesto or similar is to be expected, but not at the expense of consulting on the details of such proposals, listening to the responses of those affected and those with expertise about their implications. Without consultation, broader and new implications and issues may not come to light and be incorporated into decision-making.

For more information about City Greens, see our manifesto:
https://www.greenoxford.com/OGP_City_Council_Manifesto_2021.pdf